

THE SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP

But, among the men and women who gave up everything to become Catherine's followers and disciples, there were some very different from the Dominican tertiaries and the friars. Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, a vernacular poet, and by rank a noble of one of the lesser Sienese houses, who joined her about this time, is the first of a little group of youths of birth and learning who left their families to cleave to her and serve her as secretaries, binding themselves to her in worship and love of friendship ; a spiritual tie of whole-hearted devotion, which she describes in her *Dialogue* as the means chosen by God to raise a soul as yet imperfect in love to the perfection of love. By thus conceiving a spiritual and absorbing love for some one creature, such a soul frees herself from all unworthy passions, and advances in virtue, by this ordered love casting out all disordered affections. By the unselfishness and perfection of her love for such a friend, the soul can test the perfection or imperfection of her love for God.¹ It is like the love of Dante for Beatrice, but kindled at the foot of the Cross and consecrated at the steps of the Altar.

" You asked me to receive you for son," she writes to Neri, in the first of her letters to him ; " and, therefore, I—unworthy, miserable, and wretched as I am—have already received you, and receive you with affectionate love ; and I pledge, and will pledge myself for ever in the sight of God, to bear the weight for you of all the sins you have committed or might commit. But I pray you to fulfil my desire ; that is, that you conform yourself with Christ crucified, by entirely severing yourself from the conversation of the world; for in no other way could we have this conformity with Christ. Clothe yourself, clothe yourself with Christ crucified ; for He is that wedding garment that will give you grace here, and afterwards will place you at the banquet of life eternal." ²

A very different type from this highly-strung and sensitive poet (who to the end was tormented by terrible fits of despondency and depression, with a haunting fear lest he should not have

¹ *Dialogo*, cap. 144.

² Letter 99 (272). In all subsequent letters, Catherine addresses him as *fu*.